

The Journey



Aryac realised early on that this was not going to be easy and indeed, there was a high chance he would not make it to the end of the quest. That he found out, from his traveling companion, that he had to face the evil warlord Kristan was terrible enough; but he also discovered that he was the last of the bloodline of the Guardians and that only he could wield the Bow of Ithaca that could slay Kristan. If Aryac failed, then the world would be engulfed in darkness for all time, with all nature at the whim of a tyrant.

Aryac moved through the forest like he was born to it. The action of blending in as natural to him as sleeping. If the stranger was impressed with his skills, he did not show it – he moved too with as much grace and speed as Aryac himself. The days began to meld together as they journeyed toward their ultimate destination (Mount Arat) and the end of their quest. Aryac's appeal to animals was once again in evidence, as on the first night a lone wolf came out of the night to sniff at the strangers around the campfire. With a warning growl to the stranger the wolf, who Aryac named Flint, then came and lay at the feet of the young man and promptly fell asleep.

The journey was uneventful until they reached a rushing river - which they had no option but to cross. The wolf went ahead, leaping into the torrent and swimming powerfully to the other side. As the shock of the ice cold spring engulfed him, Aryac gasped as he hit the water and was immediately buffeted by the raging floods: he struggled to stay afloat. Flint howled at him from the other side as he began to take in great mouthfuls of water and slip beneath the surface. All of sudden, he felt a massive heave from beneath him; he rose unexpectedly coughing and spluttering to the surface of the river. Aryac found himself clinging to the back of a massive black bear that used his huge strength to power to the shore, then after depositing him unceremoniously at the feet of the wolf, the bear made determinedly for the woods. After a very short while it returned carrying in his teeth the dripping honeycomb from a bee hive (which still had a few angry former inhabitants buzzing furiously around the head of the great beast) and gently lay it at the feet of Aryac. Looking relieved beyond belief, the boy gave the bear a hug and then watched as it lumbered back into the forest – this time for good. It was only then that Aryac noticed his former companion was nowhere to be seen...

Feeling rested and refreshed, the following morning Aryac set off - with the wolf foraging ahead into the trees - toward the growing mountain ahead of him. Despite the growing heat of the sun, and over an hour into the trek, he felt invigorated by the sense of achievement of a tough task. I mean, he had a whole forest of friends to aid him, he had survived the river and was the descendant of an order of heroes. Yes, the sweat was pouring down his face and he was beginning to feel a dull ache in his upper thighs, yet it was a positive feeling, one of accomplishment. He was going to do this! Aryac rounded the bend of another ridge when the terrain suddenly changed drastically. The forest fell away behind them as they continued forward. He had come out of the shadow of the evergreen trees and felt the ground take a harder (and steeper) feel. Jagged rocks jutted out from the path, bruising to the toes and sharp to the

feet; his earlier confidence began to ebb away. This was not going to be as smooth as he thought, Aryac began to realise. Determination gripped him, however, and he continued advancing. Flint, sensing he would need to take a different route, peered at Aryac seemingly for approval, and then lopped off around the mountain pass.

The next hour was a blur as Aryac steadily trudged up the side of the steep mountain. Frustratingly, the temperature dropped sharply and he knew that, despite the sweat running down his body, he needed to put on his spare cloak in order to keep hypothermia at bay. Doubts began to creep in, as he tediously put one foot in front of the other, every rock began to feel like a boulder and every step, as though his boot was filled with weights. Aryac was now very tired; his mind was telling him to give up. Yet his heart would not, and that is what he was going to listen to. Rising before Aryac now - as the last obstacle before reaching the goal of his quest - was the steep and seemingly unassailable 'Griffins Peak'; a ridge that rose only two-hundred feet, yet was twice as steep as the highest peak of the Fortress Earie of the King of the Eagles - Golder. Many had been defeated by its ferocity, Aryac was determined he was not going to be one of its victims.

With a pair of stout climbing daggers (provided by Mandor) in either hand, and with a rope around his waist, Aryac began, slowly and carefully, to climb the seemingly impregnable barrier in front of him. As he moved spider-like up the wall, he felt pain in every part of his body. Glued to his hands from the cold, both daggers were frozen to his fists. His heart was racing, jelly-like legs were quivering and his weak arms were trembling with the effort. Although not afraid of heights, on one occasion he froze statue-like on the wall, too petrified to look down and too exhausted to look up. Mentally drained and physically shattered Aryac was just about ready to slip into oblivion when he heard a yowling above his head. There above him was a snow-leopard, urgently nuzzling at his head. It was then Aryac realised he was saved; the animal was instructing him to follow. Cautiously, the leopard led him to all the right footholds until suddenly he hauled himself over the edge of the cliff - he had reached the top of the ridge. Aryac was greeted by the wet tongue of Flint, excitedly wagging his tail and practically asking him about where he had been. The snow-leopard was now no-where to be seen.

Gently Aryac pushed Flint away and scanned the horizon. His exhaustion vanished in an instant. He had done it! There before him was the entrance to a dark cave. He had reached his goal and made it! His destiny stretched forward and he looked at the intimidating darkness before him. Then, with a resolute frown, he squared his shoulders and strode confidently forward until he was swallowed up by the darkness.